

He also points out that the appraisal will need to take into account the local church setting to be most effective. It is more difficult to blossom in a church saddled with difficulties.

One observation. Appraisal is not to be confused with review. Some have people in our churches who will use any chance to undermine our ministry and even try to bring about its end. The main purpose of appraisal should be that of ministerial formation and development, not giving ammunition to such characters. The parable of the talents seems singularly relevant to this question of appraisal. "Those who are prepared to lay their talents on the line and look, either on their own or preferably with the aid of another's vision, in a critical and constructive way at their life and work as a servant of God, do have the opportunity of finding rewards in this particular aspect of their ministry".

Ministry - the new century version

For all of these challenges, I believe we can and should continue to thank God for the enormous privilege of serving Jesus in this way.

'If your time to you is worth savin',
Then you'd better start swimming
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a changin'.'

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Sermons - again!

John Drane

Introduction

In April 1999, I gave an address to the ministers of the Baptist Union of Great Britain at their annual assembly. The topic was 'Tomorrow's Pastors May Not Preach', and this article is a summary of what I said on that occasion. The title wasn't my own choice, though it was certainly eye-catching, and on the Sunday before, a lay leader (older man) in my own church asked me what I was planning to say. When I told him, he immediately said, 'Well,

I'll drink to that'. He went on to comment that, though he had nothing against sermons as such, 'I would really like something that would bring me closer to God'. I was intrigued by such comments from someone who is a pillar of the church, and in most ways would be a traditionalist. It highlighted for me what I had often suspected, that sermons are more popular with ministers than with other people. But can churches continue to be dominated by the needs of ministers? Kennon Callahan has claimed that 'The day of the professional minister is over...Professional ministers are at their best (and they do excellent work) in a reasonably churched culture. But put them in an unchurched culture, and they are lost. In an unchurched culture, they do a reasonably decent job of presiding over stable and declining and dying churches. They maintain a sense of presence, dignity, decorum, and decency - with a quietly sad regret - much like the thoughtful undertaker who sees to keeping things in good order throughout the funeral.'³

Ministry as Mission

Effective ministry today will be shaped less by the needs of those already in the church, and more by the concerns of the millions who are not, but who are engaged on a serious spiritual search and could be reached with the Gospel. Here, three questions are fundamental:

1. How was the Gospel communicated in the early church? Apart from the fact that the apostles were clearly successful in a pluralistic context, it is also important for us to operate in continuity with them, especially the example of Jesus, but also others. To facilitate creative exploration of that, we also need to ask:
2. What is our inherited understanding of preaching and sermons - and where has it come from?
3. What might be the most effective vehicle for communicating the Word of God to the culture of today and tomorrow?

Of these three, the question of culture is of extreme importance. In *The Logic of Evangelism*, William Abraham recommended that 'we need to abandon the image of proclamation that is so prevalent in the modern Protestant tradition.'⁴ He went on to suggest that

³ Kennon L Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership* (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1990), 3-4.

⁴ William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Hodder, London 1989) 171.

‘that image, represented by the solid, tripartite sermon ... is a culturally relative phenomenon.’⁵ It is only when cultural fashions change that it is possible to take a step back and realize how easily Christians can become enslaved by essentially secular values.

Everybody now talks about ‘postmodernity’, though few seem to have much idea what it is, except that something has clearly changed and the ways of doing things that served previous generations well are no longer relevant today. Though there is a lot of talk about postmodern philosophy, and it is widely assumed that we have all bought into a worldview that rejects metanarratives and has no place for truth, I don’t see much sign of that in popular culture, as distinct from the somewhat arcane discussions that go on in some of our universities. Most ordinary people have every appearance of being no more interested in postmodern ideology than they were in the Enlightenment-inspired systems that preceded it. They are more likely to be post-modern in a sociological sense than a philosophical one. By that, I mean that they have discarded the old ways of doing things, and are looking in a pragmatic way for new ways of being.

Modernist Mistakes

This is the context in which the church now needs to share the Gospel, and I fear that if the philosophical aspects of contemporary culture form our missiological base, we are unlikely to make much progress. For most people, it is the culture of modernity, especially its way of doing things, that is the point where they most feel in need of new models for behaviour and relationships. This focuses especially on the emphasis on control, power, structure and order which seem to have dominated western institutions, including the churches, of course. The roots of all that can be traced back at least as far as classical Greek philosophy, with its emphasis on the importance of what is cognitive, rational and abstract, and a corresponding suspicion of and embarrassment by intuition, feeling, story, and embodiment. When combined with the Enlightenment nostrum of the autonomous rational individual being at the centre of all things, and the mechanistic emphasis of Cartesian and Baconian science on analysis and reductionism, all this turned into a powerful theological cocktail which was eagerly imbibed by our forebears and produced whole generations of people

⁵ William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (London: Hodder 1989), 171.

who came to see spirituality as an object to be dissected, so that theologians operated on the Bible in much the same way as an anatomist might inspect a dead body.

Because of the prevalence of this form of communication, we are not always aware of just how anomalous it is as a way of understanding Scripture and discerning God's will - not to mention communicating the good news to today's people. Walter Wink presents six aspects of the sermon as we know it that, in his view, shows it to be a paradigm of modernity: ⁶

1. Sermons force a binary response - a yes/no, agree/disagree, assent/dissent kind of thing;
2. Sermons expect a passive response, at best an internalized reflection rather than provoking any genuine thought or responsiveness;
3. Sermons perpetuate an authoritative image of what church is - essentially an imperialistic model in which there is a hierarchy of spirituality, just as there is of everything else;
4. Sermons as traditionally preached evoke and receive no feedback; from the preacher's point of view, there is no chance to know where people are at in their thinking;

There is no means of knowing how the text is addressing the hearers, or not as the case might be.

Some will no doubt feel that is too strident a criticism, but the overall point is well made. You only need to compare and contrast our inherited models of sermon with a different heritage - say in the African American churches, or in some of the black-led churches in Britain. Martin Luther King's sermons swayed thousands, and changed the face of American society, but when he visited Britain hardly anyone went to hear him, and those who did weren't specially impressed. Our cultural expectations do not generally predispose us to respond in the kind of way on which that style of preaching depends for its effectiveness. The Enlightenment taught us to be passive and subservient rather than interactive and responsive.

New Testament insights

⁶ W. Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville: Abingdon 2nd ed1990), 74.

The model of Jesus is obviously of some considerable importance. Some will dismiss this approach as irrelevant, for there is a significant body of opinion which prefers to regard Jesus as an object of belief, rather than an example to be followed, and which prefers to derive actual models for church life from people like Paul. To me, the idea that Jesus is not a model is, at best, unorthodox, and quite possible heretical. But in terms of communication strategies, it is instructive that Jesus and Paul both provide us with very similar models.

Jesus typically did two things: he asked questions, and he told stories. He also began where people were at - both literally and metaphorically - and challenged and moved them on effectively. We seem to have lost the ability to do either of these things very effectively. Very occasionally, Jesus used the Jewish scriptures, but there is no evidence at all that he ever used a text as a basis for what might be regarded as expository sermons.

We find much the same thing with Paul. He appears to have used scripture more extensively - at least in writing letters to those who were already Christian, though Acts depicts his mission approach as being more varied than that. There can be no doubt that he tended to use scripture in a very strange way, and generally did with it all the things that modernity has taught us to regard as either illegitimate or misleading, if not fanciful and untrue. He quotes it so loosely that no-one has ever managed to decide what kind of version he used, and he often engages in a very subjective kind of exegesis, mostly based on intuition and imagination - and, like Jesus, he too appears never to have preached expository sermons. The story in Acts 20:7-12 is especially enlightening in this respect. It is the only narrative account anywhere in the New Testament of what might be called a church service. Other passages give advice on the conduct and leadership of worship, of course, but as part of an ongoing debate rather than as a dispassionate description of what would happen on such an occasion. Like many Western readers, I had always imagined that Paul must have preached a very long sermon, for the unfortunate Eutychus fell fast asleep. But that was until I managed to extrapolate myself out of my post-Enlightenment cultural context and began to look more closely at what Luke says. As elsewhere, he chose his terminology with care, and the key words describing what Paul was doing are *dialegomai* (vs. 7) and *homileas* (vs. 11).

The first even transliterates into English as ‘dialoguing’, and is the same word used to describe how the disciples ‘argued with one another about who was the greatest’ (Mark 9:34, Luke 9:46), while the second describes regular conversation and is used in Luke 24 to describe what the couple on the road to Emmaus were doing. All of this implies that, insofar as there are models for effective communication in the New Testament, at their heart are values of interactive sharing and community. The same emphasis comes out in Luke’s account of Paul’s ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10), and Paul’s own instructions for the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11, where again the verb ‘do this’ is plural (vss. 24, 26), referring to the whole of God’s people, not just one individual leader.

Cultural Challenges

The need of people today is the same as it has ever been: they need to hear the Gospel. There are scriptural passages which ask questions like, “how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10.14). Because of the way our inherited culture has predisposed us, most of us read that as a Biblical mandate to keep on preaching the kind of structured Enlightenment-inspired monologues with which we are familiar. But the Greek word Paul used never did mean ‘preacher’ in that very narrow sense: it was somebody who brought a message, and who did it in a way that something was communicated. Even the New Testament has been translated to fit in with our own expectations and spiritual poverty (another example would be Rom 16.7, where Andronicus and Junia have become ‘men’ among the apostles, even though there is not a single example in the whole of ancient literature where Junia is anything other than a woman’s name).

In terms of today’s different cultural context, one of the greatest tragedies facing the church is not that people in Britain are spiritually indifferent or anti-Christian, but precisely the opposite: they are spiritually searching, and open to the Gospel, but are unable to hear it. For the most part, they can’t hear it because we are not communicating the faith in ways that are accessible to anyone except ourselves, and others who are like us. When we have in the past sent missionaries to other cultures, we have automatically taken account of that, and the Gospel has been appropriately contextualized all around the world, so that the message of Jesus can be heard speaking in the tones which people recognize. Today’s pressing need is for us to contextualize the

Gospel in our own culture. This is not just about words, but involves a whole style of being, because to accomplish this in any kind of fashion that will communicate the Gospel to those who are lost will require that we engage in a massive re-imagination not just of the shape of our churches and our church life, but of much of Christian theology as well. The sort of verbal communication that will be most appropriate is likely to involve telling the story of Jesus, as well as our own stories of faith, being descriptive rather than prescriptive, listening as well as speaking, and being open about our own weaknesses as well as our strengths. To that extent, the sermon as we know it has probably outlived its usefulness as a tool in mission, though it may well continue to play a part for some time in the lives of those who are already in the church.

A recent event struck me as an example of how the faith might effectively be contextualized in the emerging culture. It was the dedication of a baby, born to a couple whose first child is now about three or four years old. I had been to the dedication of their first-born as well, which was in a church during regular Sunday worship - and as I recall, it was a relevant and meaningful occasion. This time, however, the dedication was held in the child's home, late on a Saturday afternoon, and the difference was tangible from the start. For one thing, the parents obviously had much greater confidence in inviting their unchurched work associates, neighbours and friends to be part of it. There must have been fifty or more there, adults and children, and as on any social occasion we talked, drank and generally got to know one another. Then the 'formal' bit of the proceedings started with some games, which led quite naturally into some singing (much of it on CDs), an interactive reading from the Bible, some words from the parents explaining why all this was important to them, the lighting of a 'baptismal candle', promises from parents and godparents, a homespun version of the creed, a Celtic blessing, some more prayers, songs and readings. As we then continued our partying, I was impressed with the way everyone obviously felt fully involved and shared in it all with no embarrassment whatever. Apart from the parents' brief explanations of why they wanted to do it this way, there was nothing that could conceivably be construed as a 'sermon' in any sense. However, in the course of the evening I myself had several very extensive conversations with guests, most of whom asked me if I thought the child had really been properly 'done', a query which invariably led onto discussion

of what it might mean for a baby to be ‘done’ anyway, and how Christian belief can help make sense out of life.

What had happened was that Christians had applied a bit of lateral thinking in order to ensure that their spirituality was expressed in ways that their friends from outside the church could both understand and relate to. Though they probably didn’t realize it, the couple who planned it had identified some key features in today’s popular spirituality and had created a space in that context within which the Gospel could be heard afresh. There was a sense of authentic community, making connections with other people, and through them with the creativity which is at the heart of all things. There was a spirituality of space and place, expressed through the sacralization of what otherwise might look to be ‘secular’ space, in this case the home. There was a place for ritual, not only in the sense of carrying out symbolic actions, but also the sense of pilgrimage that many felt in going to be part of such an occasion. And there was also a priority accorded to experience, emotion and feeling over dogma, expressed through the creation of a do-it-yourself spirituality, rather than accepting what religious institutions might offer. When you compare that with overt expressions of the popular spiritual search, such as what followed the death of Princess Diana in 1997, it is possible to begin to see the sort of things that might just make a difference to Christian witness in the new century. The one thing you don’t need here is the professional minister, which is probably something many of us will find it easier to talk about than to act upon.

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Eager Longing – Developing True Reverence for One Another

Warner White

As the new pastor enters the church hall. one member of the congregation leans over to another and says, “Isn't she wonderful! That sermon was the best I've ever heard,” to which the other replies, “She’s so sensitive. I think she’ll really understand me.”